

Wilfrid Pearson

1888 - 1918



Born and lived in Oxford

Educated at Oxford High School, Magdalen College School and The Leys School, Cambridge

Chemist and captain of Oxfordshire Nomads Rugby Football Club

Died near Cambrai, aged 30, on 29 September 1918

Family and Education

Wilfrid Hearne Pearson was born on 18 April 1888 at 3 Winchester Road, St Giles, Oxford. His father, Arthur Pearson MA (Oxon), was a Wesleyan Methodist local preacher and an ironmonger at 31 Cornmarket. His mother was Eunice Mary (née Hearne), and they later lived at 59 Banbury Road. Wilfrid was the third of their five children. By 1890 his father owned the Oxford Drug Company on the corner of Broad Street and had acquired Boswells (which survived as a department store until 2020).

Wilfrid was educated at the City of Oxford High School for Boys from 1897 to 1902, alongside TE Lawrence who was later widely known as 'Lawrence of Arabia'. In 1903 he joined Magdalen College School, where he excelled at sports including cycling. In 1905 at the age of 17 he was sent to The Leys School Cambridge, which was founded to educate the sons of lay Methodists. There he won First Colours at football: in 1909 he became the first captain of the Oxfordshire Nomads Rugby Football Club.

Wilfrid qualified as a chemist and at the 1911 census he was 22 and working as a chemist's assistant in one of his father's three shops in the city. He was 25 when war broke out, and on 7 October 1915 he married Daisy Beatrice Turrill. He attested for the army in December that year, but remained in reserve because of his occupation. By 1916 he was Managing Director of the Oxford Drug Company, and on 15 March 1917 his daughter Margaret was born.

War Service: 2/1 Northern Cyclist Battalion, then Machine Gun Corps

Wilfrid's exemption from war service had ended in January 1917 and on 26 March he joined the Inns of Court Officer Training Corps at Berkhamsted. Then on 26 November he joined the 2/1 Northern Cyclist Battalion as a Second Lieutenant. This unit was armed as infantry and could have provided mobile firepower and been used for scouting or message carrying. It served in home defence in the north of England, and was based at Skegness.

Later Wilfrid transferred to the Machine Gun Corps, which had been formed in 1915 in an effort to catch up with German success in deploying these guns. Gun technology and battle tactics developed during the war to devastating effect, and eventually several machine-gun companies were attached to each battlefield Division. Towards the end of the war machine gunners often served well in advance of the front line, and their high casualty rate earned them the nickname of 'The Suicide Club'.

Wilfrid fought in the 57th Battalion, Machine Gun Corps, which was formed in March 1918 to support the 57th Division, although it is not clear when he joined them. He was assigned to B Company, who moved into the front line east of Arras on 9 August. Over the next weeks they experienced periods of action interspersed with rest. Even in the rear they could still be in danger: on the moonlit night of 23 August they suffered bombing from enemy aircraft. Shortly after this the division became part of a general advance towards Cambrai.

B Company had 16 Vickers guns with six men each, and were involved in a series of bouts of fierce fighting. From 27 September they were at the Battle of the Canal du Nord: Wilfrid died in action there on 29 September, aged 30. The Leys School records that he had 'served with distinction'.

Wilfrid is buried at Anneux British Cemetery, and is remembered on his parents' grave at Wolvercote Cemetery. There are also memorials to him at St Michael at the North Gate church in Oxford, and at The Leys School. His widow Daisy remarried in 1924, and his daughter Margaret married Raymond Waite in 1945.



Wilfrid with his daughter Margaret



Memorial at St Michael at the North Gate

This is the story of one of the men who appear on a war memorial at Wesley Memorial Methodist Church in Oxford, UK. These stories were compiled in 2018-19 from a variety of family history and military sources. In particular, Chris Baker's site, 'The Long, Long Trail' has provided valuable details of the men's experience of battle:

<https://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/>

Wilfrid Pearson's story incorporates information from 'Mr Brownrigg's Boys: Magdalen College School and The Great War' by David Bebbington (2014), where further details can be found.

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